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C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 003240

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: BERLUSCONI BACKS THE PRESIDENT'S JUNE 24 SPEECH ON THE MIDDLE EAST

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CLASSIFIED BY: ACTING POL MC GARY ROBBINS FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

1. (C) SUMMARY: ACCORDING TO HIS DEPUTY DIPLOMATIC ADVISOR, PM AND ACTING FM BERLUSCONI REACTED VERY POSITIVELY TO THE PRESIDENT'S JUNE 24 SPEECH ON THE MIDDLE EAST. BERLUSCONI AGREED THAT THE PA NEEDED A NEW LEADERSHIP, AND STRESSED THE IMPORTANCE OF INSTITUTIONAL AND ECONOMIC REFORM FOR PALESTINIANS. ON THE INTERNATIONAL PEACE CONFERENCE, BERLUSCONI, WHO HAD EXPRESSED SERIOUS INTEREST IN HOSTING THE CONFERENCE THIS SUMMER, HAS CONCLUDED THAT THE CURRENT CLIMATE WAS NOT APPROPRIATE FOR HOLDING A SUCCESSFUL PEACE CONFERENCE. END SUMMARY.

ON THE PRESIDENT'S SPEECH AND ARAFAT

2. (C) ON JULY 2, POLOFF MET PAOLO DIONISI, BERLUSCONI'S DEPUTY DIPLOMATIC ADVISOR, WHO ACCOMPANIED THE ITALIAN PM ON THE JUNE 26-27 G8 SUMMIT. DIONISI SAID THAT BERLUSCONI PRAISED THE PRESIDENT'S SPEECH AS "STRONG AND ENGAGED" AND AS THE FIRST PUBLIC CALL FOR A CHANGE IN PA LEADERSHIP. THE METAPHOR BERLUSCONI USED IS ONE HE BORROWED FROM AVRAHAM BURG, PRESIDENT OF THE ISRAELI KNESSET, WHOM HE HAD MET IN ROME ON JUNE 19: "THE ISRAELIS ASK THEMSELVES WHETHER THEY DON'T RUN THE RISK OF FALLING INTO A SITUATION WHERE THEY NEGOTIATE THE SALE OF GOODS WITH THE OWNER OF THE SHOP, REACH AN AGREEMENT ON THE COST WITH HIM, AND THEN HIS EMPLOYEES REFUSE TO DELIVER THESE GOODS." BERLUSCONI STRESSED THAT THE PALESTINIANS DESPERATELY NEEDED INSTITUTIONAL AND ECONOMIC REFORMS. HE CALLED FOR A NEW PALESTINIAN LEADERSHIP AND FOR
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ELECTIONS TO BE HELD AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. MEANWHILE HOWEVER, UNTIL A NEW PALESTINIAN LEADERSHIP WAS ELECTED BY THE PALESTINIANS, THERE WAS NO ALTERNATIVE TO DEALING WITH ARAFAT IN HIS CAPACITY AS THE ELECTED LEADER OF THE PA, STRESSED BERLUSCONI.

ON THE INTERNATIONAL PEACE CONFERENCE

3. (C) BERLUSCONI STILL BELIEVED IN THE IMPORTANCE OF AN INTERNATIONAL PEACE CONFERENCE, AND WAS STILL WILLING TO HOST IT AND PAY FOR IT. HOWEVER, BERLUSCONI NO LONGER FELT THAT THE CURRENT CLIMATE WAS THE RIGHT ONE TO HAVE A SUCCESSFUL CONFERENCE. HE FELT THAT THE PA DID NOT CURRENTLY HAVE THE KIND OF RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP NEEDED FOR A SUCCESSFUL CONFERENCE, AND REEMPHASIZED THE NEED FOR THE PALESTINIANS TO ELECT A NEW LEADERSHIP AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

4. (C) COMMENT: THE JUNE 26-27 G8 SUMMIT IN KANANASKIS MARKED A METAMORPHOSIS IN BERLUSCONI'S POSITION ON ARAFAT (REF) AND ON THE INTERNATIONAL PEACE CONFERENCE, WHICH HE HAD PREVIOUSLY STAUNCHLY SUPPORTED AND OFFERED TO HOST. AMONG THE LEADERS PRESENT AT THE G8 SUMMIT, BERLUSCONI APPEARS TO HAVE EXPRESSED SOME OF THE STRONGEST SUPPORT FOR THE PRESIDENT'S PLAN ON THE MIDDLE EAST. ALTHOUGH HE IS NOW STEPPING BACK FROM HIS NEAR-TERM PLAN FOR AN ERICE CONFERENCE, BERLUSCONI WILL CONTINUE TO SEEK OPPORTUNITIES TO PLAY A HELPFUL, HIGH-PROFILE, ROLE. END COMMENT.
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